

Ottoman Genesis, 1300–1397

The rains were heavy that spring and the Sangarius River overflowed its banks, seeking out its former bed under a long-abandoned bridge. A torrent of mud, silt, and debris spilled along the route, and there the Ottoman Empire began, in the western borderlands of the Mongol world at the dawn of the little ice age, in the month of March at the turn of the eighth Islamic century. Turkish herdsmen, fleeing the rain-ravaged heights with their flocks, were able to bypass the broken Byzantine defenses on the ruined riverbank.¹ Their advance guard surprised a Byzantine force. The emboldened Turks attacked and pillaged. More raids came, and more: a veritable flood. The regular army marched out from Constantinople under orders from the emperor to meet the Turkish threat, but at the plain of Bapheus outside Nikomedia the Turks won a great victory.

Box 1.1: Ottoman Sultans of the Eighth Islamic Century

Osman, d. 1324?
 Orhan, 1324–61?
 Murad I, 1361?–89
 Bayezid I, 1389–1402

Not so fast. One single battle does not an empire make. The earliest surviving Turkish descriptions date only from a hundred years later, by which time memories of how the empire began were closely tied up with opinions about the way things had turned out. And so, loosened from firm historical moorings, the Ottoman founding generation went adrift in eddies of poetry and epic. Even the date is not quite certain. For Ottoman writers this was just as well.

They liked to put it in the year 699 of the hegira of the Prophet Muhammad, as if the Ottoman house fulfilled the hope of the “Renewer of the Age” that was to appear at the dawn of each new century. And what an extraordinary dawn this was – the Islamic year 700 corresponded almost exactly to the Christian year 1300, a remarkable overlapping of eras.

Raids and rushing waters flow from the same verbal source in Turkish, and tears too, from the root *ak-*, and many later writers both Turkish and Greek knew of the pun. “Religion’s reinforcements *rushed* over the infidel,” quipped the Turkish poet Ahmedi,² and the Greek historian Ducas wrote, “If they hear the herald’s voice summoning them to the attack – which in their language is called *akin* – they descend like a *flooding river*, uninvited.”³

The Turkish Flood

Almost nothing is now known of Osman, founder of the House of Osman, the man remembered as the first of the Ottoman sultans. “Osman Bey appeared,” stated a laconic chronograph, later. No one knows when or where he was born, and for a long time not a single artefact existed that could be confidently dated to his lifetime. Now two coins have come to light, one in a private collection in London and the other in the Istanbul Archaeological Museum, inscribed *Osman ibn Ertugrul*.⁴ Even his name is the subject of some controversy. The Greek historian Pachymeres,⁵ who gave us the description of the Sangarius flood and is the one contemporary writer to mention Osman’s name, did not call him Osman at all but rather Ataman. The surprising notion that Osman had another name finds support in two later sources, one an armchair geography written around 1350 in Arabic and the other a biography of the Muslim saint Haji Bektash, circa 1500. Ataman is a Turkish name or maybe Mongol, while Osman is impeccably Muslim, the Turkish form of the Arabic *‘Uthman* – as in the companion of the Prophet Muhammad, the third Caliph of Islam. This has led to some suspicion that our Osman, or Ataman, the Ottoman, might have been born a pagan, that he may have taken his new name Osman later when he became a Muslim. But if this were true, if Osman were indeed a convert to Islam who changed his name, why would his sons have kept their genuinely Turkish names, who were Muslims beyond any doubt?⁶

From what Pachymeres wrote, about the only thing we can surmise of the Turk he called Ataman is that he was a warrior. With the Sangarius (Sakarya) River raids and the victory at Bapheus, Turkish warriors came from far and wide to join him.⁷ Ataman laid siege to Nicaea and, though he was not able to take the city, subjected the surrounding area to raids, killing many, taking some captive,

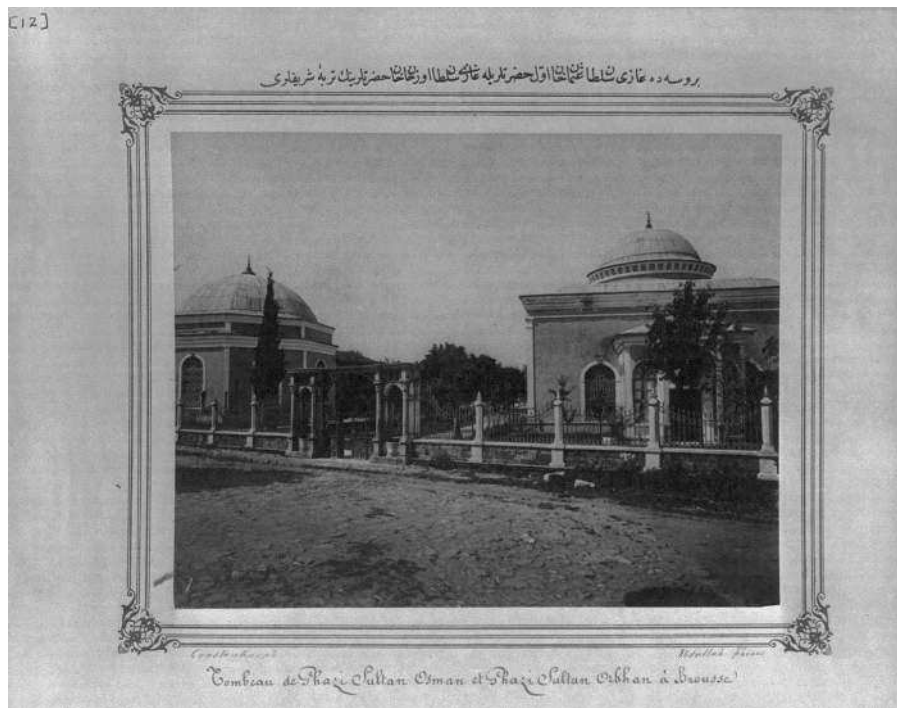


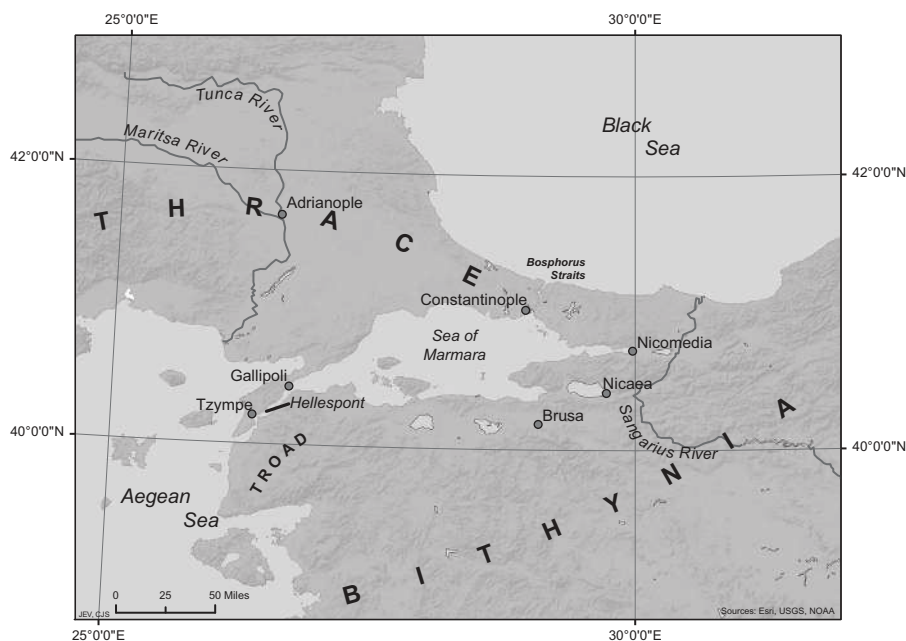
Figure 1.1: Tombs of Osman and Orhan in Bursa, in a photograph by Abdullah Frères, ca. 1880–93. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Abdülhamid II Collection, LC-USZ62-81514.

and scattering the rest. He did take several other fortresses and fortified towns in the Sangarius valley, using them to store his plunder. In a similar manner he destroyed the countryside around Brusa (Bursa), but also failed to take that city.

The date of Osman's death too is uncertain. He probably died by 1324, the date of a trust deed registered by his son Orhan.⁸ The Moroccan world traveler Ibn Battuta, who visited the area in 1331–32, wrote that Osman was buried in the mosque of Bursa, probably the former Church of Saint Elias.⁹ This church is no longer standing, due to an earthquake two hundred years ago. Osman's remains now lie next to those of Orhan, father and son in suitable twin mausoleums erected in 1863.

Orhan

It is far easier to find contemporary evidence about Orhan, the son, than about Osman, the father. Two of Orhan's inscriptions survive, and copies of three of



Map 1.1: Around the Marmara Sea. Drawn by Jason Van Horn and Caitlin Strikwerda.

his trust deeds;¹⁰ he appears by name in Mongol accounting records;¹¹ and he is mentioned in Persian and Arabic sources. Ibn Battuta claimed to have met Orhan, “the greatest of the kings of the Turkmens and the richest in wealth, lands and military forces.” Orhan “fought with the infidels continually,” and moved regularly between his more than one hundred castles, checking that they were in good repair, never staying more than a month in any one place.¹² Ibn Battuta’s impression of Orhan as engaged in incessant combat is emphatically supported by Greek writers who left accounts. He and his men took Brusa (Bursa) in 1326 after a long siege, and by the next year he was minting coins there, as a surviving silver piece shows. Nicaea (İznik) fell to Orhan’s forces in 1331 and Nicomedia (İznikmid, İzmit) in 1337. Conquest of these three major Greek cities, Brusa, Nicaea, and Nicomedia, made Orhan the master of the whole region of Bithynia.

Orhan was only one of many Turkish rulers Ibn Battuta met in his tour of Asia Minor. Turkmen clans fleeing the Mongol invasions supplied the manpower for many an ambitious lord who plundered the river valleys and coasts of the Black Sea, Marmara and Aegean, beginning in the 1290s. Several of them besides Orhan used their armed bands to create rudimentary administrative structures. By 1340 they controlled most of the overland routes and caravan

towns of the river valleys and, on the coasts, joined the contest for the ports and shipping lanes between Byzantium and the Italian maritime states. The Turkish lords of these borderlands and their followers seemed coarse and unruly not just to the Greeks but also to the urbane Muslim writers of “Rum,” or Rome, the name given to the upland plateau because it used to be within the Roman Empire. Islamic culture had prevailed there for more than two hundred years under the rule of the Seljuk dynasty,¹³ which had governed a cultured, Persian-influenced kingdom centered at Konya. The newcomers were semi-nomads who proudly spoke southwestern (i.e. Oghuz; see figure 1.3) Turkic languages. Their lifestyle was based on raiding as well as stock breeding and marketing the products of their herds.¹⁴ Their holy men and dervishes were eager to carry Islam into new lands. Vassals of the Mongol rulers of Iran (the Ilkhanids), their appearance was linked to events of the previous century, beyond the horizons of their own memories, when commercial and political relations throughout Southwestern Eurasia had been dramatically disrupted by the Mongol advance.

Violence, Disease, and Calamity

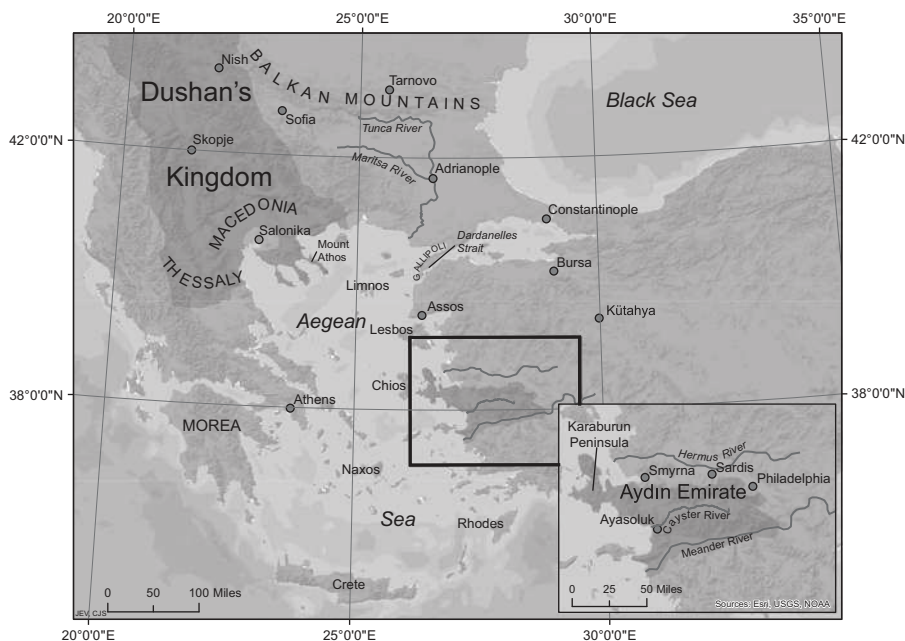
The Mongol destruction of Khwarezm in 1219 had set in motion a forced migration of central Eurasian peoples that affected all the societies west of the Caspian Sea. Among the refugees and migrants were thousands of Turkmens with their families and herds. Their tribal societies were highly mobile and their inherent military potential renowned. The biographies of two great saints, Rumi (a.k.a. Mevlana Jalal al-Din), and Haji Bektash, are both connected with the Mongol violence – the climate change and human misery that lay behind it, and the irruption of millenarian spiritual fervor that ran ahead of it.

By 1260 political fallout from the Mongol incursions had produced three powerful kingdoms in Southwestern Eurasia. Two were Mongol – the Golden Horde in the lower Volga valley and the steppe north of the Black Sea; and the Ilkhanids in Iran, Mesopotamia, and the Caucasus, with a capital at Tabriz. The third was the Mamluk Sultanate, founded not by Mongols but by Kipchak Turkish slave officers who overthrew their Ayyubid masters and seized power in Cairo in 1250. The Mamluks ruled Egypt, Arabia, and coastal Syria. Between and around and among these three major kingdoms, from the Danube River to the upper Euphrates and Tigris, dozens of Slavic, Latin, Greek, Armenian, and Turkish nobles and lords, their names long forgotten, engaged in intense and often violent competition for control of the endpoints of the great Eurasian trade routes. These lords were called “emirs” in Turkish, whence the term “emirates” for their petty kingdoms. Among the many Turkish emirs were Osman and

Orhan, but the strongest position was held by the Greek noble dynasty of Michael VIII Palaeologus, regent of the Greek Kingdom of Nicaea, who recaptured Constantinople from the Latin crusaders in 1261.

The Byzantine Civil War

The local circumstances in which the small Turkish emirate of Orhan first became a significant factor in this larger world took the form of a dynastic crisis in Byzantium. This crisis cloaked larger issues both within the Orthodox faith tradition and international politics. In the years after the restoration of Greek rule in Constantinople Michael VIII pursued long-term Byzantine security, both through a structure of alliances, with the Kingdom of Hungary, and with the Turks and Mongols of the northern Black Sea steppe, and through union of the Orthodox Church with Rome. To large numbers of the Orthodox, clergy and laity alike, marital union with neighboring dynasties was just so much politics, whether it was with the daughter of the King of Hungary or the daughter of the Tatar Khan. Ecclesiastical union with Rome, however – finalized at the Council of Lyons in 1274 – was repulsive, and Michael's successor Andronicus II (1282–1328) ignored it. Politics did not save Byzantium in the end, but pointed



Map 1.2: The Aegean rim. Drawn by Jason Van Horn and Caitlin Strikwerda.

the Church towards the route of its trials and ultimate transfiguration. Andronicus II presided over the paradoxical loss of Byzantine sovereignty and spread of Orthodox revival in the Slavic lands. The Orthodox revival was visible especially in the mystical Hesychast movement, bubbling up from monastic communities. The home of Hesychasm was Mount Athos, where numerous monasteries were located on a peninsula in the Aegean.

The conflict broke into open civil war when the reigning emperor died in 1341, leaving 9-year-old John V as heir. The court divided into two factions. On one side, in support of the boy, were his mother the widowed Empress Anne of Savoy, the Greek patriarch, and the grand admiral. They advocated for unification with Rome as a means of strengthening the empire with military assistance, envisioning a Byzantium reconstructed on the model of the Latin maritime merchant states. In this they had the support of many Greek townsmen.¹⁵ On the other side, opposition to the empress and her party was led by the Grand Domestic John Cantacuzenus, a powerful general and military advisor at court. Cantacuzenus had the backing of most of his fellow landed aristocrats in Thrace, as well as Orthodox Christians from all walks of life who opposed union with Rome. Crucially, Cantacuzenus also had the endorsement of the monk Gregory Palamas, leader of the Hesychasts.

Sympathy to Hesychasm formed the spiritual dimension of the dynastic conflict. As a movement of personal renewal, Hesychasm focused on inward prayer, using the “prayer of the heart” as a meditative exercise. This simple prayer, *Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me*, aroused great controversy. Although Hesychasm had ancient roots in Greek spirituality, its introduction at Mount Athos in the early fourteenth century AD birthed a spiritual revival. When Turkish raids forced a temporary relocation to Salonika in the 1320s, Hesychasm came out of its monkish closet and became a mass movement. Critics attacked it as anti-intellectual, and ridiculed its discipline of yogic-like breath control, but the preaching and writing of Gregory Palamas gave the movement firm theological grounding. Palamas analyzed the experience of the believer in contemplative prayer as an encounter with the energies of God in the form of light, the same light that shone around Christ on the Mount of Transfiguration. Theological sparring grew sharp over Palamas’s distinction between the *energies* of God and the *essence* of God, which was inaccessible and unknowable. For Palamas, the point was that theology by itself is inadequate to produce true knowledge of God – the mysteries of God are beyond rational description. The only hope for salvation was to have a mind transformed by the true light of God’s grace. To many Greek aristocrats bothered by the growing influence of commercialized Italian values, Hesychast spirituality expressed an authentic Greek Christian identity.¹⁶ Although there were exceptions, Hesychasts

like Palamas tended to be strong supporters of Cantacuzenus and viscerally opposed to union with Rome.¹⁷

While Cantacuzenus was absent in Thrace in the fall of 1341, the patriarch and the empress staged a coup. They seized Cantacuzenus's property and imprisoned his allies, including Gregory Palamas. Cantacuzenus countered, declaring himself and the boy John V co-emperors, and appointing Palamas Archbishop of Salonika. But a regime of "Zealots" favorable to the empress took over Salonika and prevented Palamas from assuming his post, and Hesychasm was for the moment officially condemned. Palamas went to prison, and Cantacuzenus fled to Prishtina, where he spent nearly a year under the cynical protection of the Slavic King Stefan Dushan. As soon as Cantacuzenus departed Dushan switched sides, betrothed his son to the boy emperor's sister,¹⁸ and plundered all of Macedonia except for Salonika.

Both Byzantine factions sought allies among nobles and neighbors, not just Slavs but also the Italian city states, their Aegean colonies, and the numerous Turkish emirs of the Aegean and Black Sea coasts. The empress approached Orhan, but after getting a cool response, negotiated the backing of Orhan's neighbor to the south instead. Cantacuzenus was rebuffed by the Turkish Emir of the Troad,¹⁹ but won the support of the Emir of Aydin, the most powerful of the Aegean Turkish emirates. Aydin sent both a fleet and troops to Thrace, and ravaged the Italian commercial bases in the Aegean islands. In October 1344, however, the combined forces of the Pope, Venice, the King of Cyprus, and the Knights Hospitaller captured the port and citadel at Smyrna, a defeat from which Aydin never fully recovered.

Cantacuzenus then turned to Orhan. They sealed what became a lasting alliance by Orhan's marriage to Cantacuzenus's second daughter, Theodora.²⁰ Two thousand Turkish troops led by Orhan's sons joined Cantacuzenus's son Matthew in a joint campaign to evict Stefan Dushan and plunder Thrace. The palace group around the empress asked for a truce, and Cantacuzenus entered Constantinople victorious in 1347. He had himself crowned by the patriarch and gave his third daughter Helena in marriage to the young John V, who became his co-regent as planned. In a show of support Orhan feasted and hunted with Cantacuzenus across the Bosphorus from Constantinople.²¹ After his coronation Cantacuzenus presided at a Church council where Hesychasm was duly declared to be orthodox. A Hesychast patriarch was appointed, and Gregory Palamas finally took up residence as Archbishop of Salonika.

The Black Death and the Marmara Earthquake

Less than six months after the feast on the Bosphorus the Black Death reached Constantinople. The pestilence struck the Aegean basin in two separate waves

within a single generation, first in 1348 and again in 1361. Crossing Eurasia by way of the overland trade routes, it devastated the Golden Horde, then spread from the Black Sea ports on the Crimean Peninsula to the Aegean and Mediterranean and across the Caucasus to Mongol Tabriz. From Tabriz the epidemic hit Mosul and Baghdad in 1348. An Armenian source described it in the upper Euphrates region. The following year it raged up and down the Aegean and Mediterranean coasts and on Cyprus.

Ibn Battuta lost his mother to the disease. He witnessed the prayers, fasting, and processions undertaken in response to the epidemic in Damascus in the summer of 1348. “The entire population of the city joined in,” he wrote.

The Jews went out with their book of the Law and the Christians with their Gospel, their women and children with them; the whole concourse of them in tears and humble supplications, imploring the favour of God through His Books and His Prophets. They made their way to the Mosque of the Footprints and remained there in supplication and invocation until near midday, then returned to the city and held the Friday service.²²

In Constantinople, “The despair was most frightful,” wrote Cantacuzenus. He and his wife saw their youngest son carried away, and “the great weight of depression was added to disease.” For Cantacuzenus the epidemic was a trial from God that drove people to acts of virtue. “Many distributed their belongings to the poor even before the disease had fallen upon them. If they saw people afflicted at any time, not one of them was so unfeeling that he did not show regret for sins he had committed . . .”²³

When Cantacuzenus had his surviving son Matthew crowned emperor in 1352, the civil war in Constantinople broke out anew. Stefan Dushan made himself “Emperor of the Serbs and Romans” at Skopje on Easter Sunday and prepared for war. Once again Cantacuzenus reached out to the Turks. As part of the agreement, troops commanded by Orhan’s son Süleyman occupied the fortress of Tzympe, on the Gallipoli peninsula. Conditions worsened as runaway inflation swept Constantinople. A desperate palace sought the mediation of Gregory Palamas.

Sailing for Constantinople, Palamas and his suite of monks entered the Dardanelles in March 1354 during a late winter storm. Their boat barely made landing at Gallipoli. There they entered a scene of utter misery. The previous Saturday evening, on the eve of the Feast of Orthodoxy (the first Sunday of Lent), an earthquake had leveled the entire area. The earthquake was strongly felt in Constantinople, a hundred miles to the east.²⁴ Gallipoli was completely destroyed, including the walls, and filled with refugees from the surrounding towns and villages. The earthquake made “not only buildings and possessions but also



Figure 1.2: Saint Gregory Palamas, from an icon at Mount Athos. Image courtesy of Saint Isaac of Syria Skete.

body and souls . . . a spoil for dogs and all manners of vultures . . . both human and non-human.”²⁵ Cantacuzenus added that many died in the freezing cold, the snow, and the rain, “especially women and newborn babies.” Immediately after the earthquake, Palamas learned, Orhan’s son Süleyman had sailed across the Dardanelles to occupy Gallipoli. Turkish troops now boarded Palamas’s boat, seizing the archbishop and his traveling companions.

By the time Palamas was released from captivity nearly a year later everything had changed. Süleyman had rebuilt Gallipoli, stronger than it was before. Turkish knights had defeated Stefan Dushan, as Cantacuzenus had hoped, but they also raided throughout Thrace and laid siege to Constantinople. His political situation unraveling, Cantacuzenus was forced from the throne.

Box 1.2: The Turks and Europe

Observers medieval and modern have seen the Ottoman capture of Gallipoli in 1354 as a symbolic beginning point for the Turkish expansion into Europe. The Byzantine Greek writer Critobulus, for example, put the crossing of the Hellespont (Dardanelles) in terms that evoked Herodotus’s famous